

LAOS

- I. The formation of a Committee for Neutrality and National Unity in Vientiane on 31 October introduces a dangerous new element into the confused political situation in Laos.
 - A. With a membership ranging from moderate supporters of Premier Souvanna Phouma to the extreme leftwing Neo Lao Hak Sat (NLHS) Party, which is the Pathet Lao's political front, the new committee appears to follow the classic Communist front pattern.
 - B. Souvanna and his half-brother, NLHS leader Prince Souphannouvong, are listed as advisors to the committee. Several NLHS leaders are members.
 - C. It is still not clear who provided the impetus for its formation, although the best guess is that the Pathet Lao and NLHS, working through their leftist stooges in Vientiane, are responsible. Once the idea of this committee was put forward, Souvanna probably considered he had little choice but to go along.
- II. This development can be expected to harden the attitudes of General Ouane's group in Luang Prabang and General Phoumi's Revolutionary Committee toward the Vientiane government.
 - A. Luang Prabang may construe formation of the committee as sufficient justification to go ahead with plans to break away from Souvanna. These plans had been held in abeyance pending the outcome of Souvanna's promised efforts to bring Captain Kong Le's group and the Pathet Lao under control in Vientiane.

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B. Phoumi will probably seize on the new committee as a sample vindication for his persistent refusal to come to terms with Souvanna.

III. Another disturbing development is the reported agreement between the Vientiane government and the Pathet Lao dividing Vientiane province into areas to be controlled by their respective military forces.

A. While Souvanna and his commanders would probably justify this on the ground that it would give them better control over the knowledge of Pathet movements, such an agreement would legitimize Pathet enclaves in the province, strengthening the Pathet position in the current peace talks.

IV. Souvanna has issued another appeal to Souphannouvong to come to Vientiane to participate personally in these talks.

A. Souvanna may feel that he and his half-brother can come to terms on the broad outline of a unification agreement which will guide the negotiating teams now facing each other across the conference table.

V. Former Premier Phoui who has been in Bangkok studying the situation with a view to reentering the Laotian political arena, is going to meet Souvanna in Luang Prabang tomorrow.

A. He has outlined several prospective solutions to the crisis, most of which are unrealistic, but he conceivably could constitute a new bridge for reconciliation of the deeply divided non-Communist groups in Vientiane, Luang Prabang and Savannakhet.

B. However, his fall from power last January was attended by a great deal of bitterness, the scars of which may limit his usefulness as a mediator.

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